



Everything Michigan

Editorial: Don't change role of community colleges

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WHY IT MATTERS

There should be compelling evidence to support the state fundamentally changing the higher education system.

State lawmakers should reject legislation that would allow community colleges to grant bachelor's degrees in certain fields. No convincing case has been made to support shifting the structure of higher education so dramatically.

Community colleges play important roles -- granting two-year degrees, offering a low-cost alternative for students going on to four-year colleges and universities, and serving as centers for worker retraining. They are helping to rebuild Michigan's economy. The Legislature should look to reinforce, not shift, that role.

Granting bachelor-degree status, even in a limited number of fields, would be a significant move that must be carefully considered. Once that door opens, there is the potential for adding more bachelor degree programs. That raises legitimate -- and consequential -- questions about competition with the state's universities, tuition, future need for more state funding and the impact on the current focus of community colleges.

Under legislation introduced by Rep. John Walsh, R-Livonia, the state's 28 community colleges would be in the position to offer bachelor degree programs in nursing, cement technology and culinary arts.

The nursing component is the centerpiece of the measure. Community colleges currently have the ability to offer an associate's degree in nursing and students can transfer to a four-year college or university for a more advanced degree.

Mr. Walsh says the changeover can help meet the state's growing need for nurses because the current four-year programs aren't able to adequately meet demand.

The recession has eased what's been a decade-long nursing shortage, but shortages are still expected in the next decade. However, the accommodation issue raised by Mr. Walsh isn't the only issue when it comes to why there is a need for nurses in Michigan and nationally.

Two major factors are a critical shortage of nursing faculty and a lack of clinical placement sites. These are factors community colleges would run up against, too, if they emerge from the arduous accreditation process successfully.

This legislation is by no means a quick fix to a complex problem. Lawmakers should weigh heavily other shortage issues and focus on quality and qualification, not numbers, when it comes to advanced degrees in this field. The other fields thrown into the mix -- cement technology and culinary arts -- are not driven by clamoring from employers or the community. There is no independent analysis supporting a huge

demand for expanding the programs.

The legislation raises more questions than answers about allowing this bachelor's-granting authority. Time would be better spent assisting community colleges and universities to provide more seamless transition between the two, especially for nursing.

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August 6, 2009

Keep community colleges on mission

Michigan would be ill-served by adopting a proposal to allow the state's 28 community colleges to offer four-year degrees. Such a move would erode community college's traditional advantage on costs - and disrupt their focus as an entry point to advanced education.

Keying off a trend that has seen other states extend community colleges' reach, State Rep. John Walsh, R-Livonia, wants the colleges here to have the option to offer bachelor's degrees in three fields: nursing, culinary arts and cement technology.

Community colleges are pitching expansion in the context of President Obama's \$12 billion plan to increase the number of community college graduates.

Creating four-year degree programs will not improve graduation rates for community colleges. Grad rates are lower at community colleges because they are open to a much wider variety of students, even those who aren't really ready or perhaps suited for the environment.

Also, a legislative wand conferring degree authority does nothing to create the expert staff, facilities and infrastructure needed for extended degree programs. This is why there are four-year colleges and two-year colleges. Each category serves a different purpose, with differing staffs and strategies.

What a four-year degree program will do, though, is invite mission creep - an old story in higher education in Michigan. Take, for example, Central Michigan University.

Its Web site says, "School founders made teacher training their mission in founding the state's second normal school."

Now, CMU offers undergraduate work in everything from accounting to construction management to women's studies. CMU will charge students this year about \$330 per credit hour - compared to Lansing Community College's \$73 per credit hour for in-district students.

This is not to pick on CMU. Similar stories could be told about Western or Eastern Michigan - or in other states.

And rest assured that, if given four-year degree authority, community colleges would begin an inexorable transformation into bigger institutions with larger staffs and much higher costs. Ten or 20 years after this process started, Michigan leaders would be arguing for the need to create new "community" colleges to provide low-cost access.

Everyone from President Obama on down is counting on community colleges to help recast the U.S. work force. That's a testament to what community colleges can do - if they stay focused on their proper role.

In a state where a four-year school will charge an undergrad \$300 an hour and up for classes, community colleges provide a great bargain. Don't lose it.

(An LSJ editorial)



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Improve links to four-year schools, jobs

BY CURTIS L. IVERY

I do not oppose the community college baccalaureate in extraordinary cases where such a program is clearly justified. However, such a program is not worth jeopardizing essential community college missions, such as expanding high-demand workforce education programs, serving student diversity with open-door services, and protecting the already fragile funding structure for Michigan community colleges.

Community colleges have a vital and unique mission. We should guard against "mission creep" -- that is, drifting into the mission of our universities and other four-year collegiate institutions. In doing so, we risk our open-door mission and its equity agenda, our certificate and associate degree workforce education programs, our university transfer programs, and our grassroots connections to our local communities that have made Michigan's community colleges great.

The future Michigan workforce will increasingly be drawn from African Americans, Latinos and other minorities, yet these are the very sectors of our society that are the most underprepared for careers in the knowledge economy.

The vast majority of the "new diversity" students entering community colleges require some form of developmental education to increase their writing, reading, math, computing, study and life management skills. We must provide all students with the individualized and special support services they need to achieve their full career and academic potential.

The essential question is one of balancing the expansion of four-year degrees with the demands of producing certificate and associate degrees. Especially in a period of economic uncertainty and financial restructuring, community colleges must assign first priority to the education of the technicians, computer specialists, nurses and other professionals who will drive economic recovery and growth.

It is also important to note that the public portion of funding Michigan's baccalaureate education is a state responsibility -- not that of local citizens who support their community colleges through a local property tax levy. This issue becomes especially critical as both state and local financial resources are stretched.

I am not aware of any empirical data that would suggest that a community college baccalaureate program is either practical or cost effective. In fact, there are other ways in which community colleges are already contributing to the goal of increasing the percentage of citizens with four-year college degrees. For example, WCCCD is one of several Michigan community colleges operating university centers. Called University Square, WCCCD's university center is creating partnerships with public and private colleges and universities to expand access to both in-class and online baccalaureate education.

In addition, there are many examples of programs that lead to a baccalaureate degree through linking community college and university programs in designated fields. Articulation agreements between community colleges assure the smooth transition for community college graduates to university baccalaureate programs. Because these other options serve WCCCD's service area very well, the

district has no plans to seek authority to offer the community college baccalaureate, even if the enabling legislation is approved.

Curtis L. Ivery is chancellor of Wayne County Community College District.
